Who is afraid of the ontological wolf ?

some comments on an ongoing anthropological debate

CUSAS Annual Marilyn Strathern Lecture, 30 May 2014

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Il faut écrire dans la langue de l'ennemi

Jean Genet [1]

[A] man who encounters a wolf has one chance in two of escaping: he needs to see the wolf first. The latter then loses its aggressiveness and flees. If the wolf perceives the presence of the man first, though, the latter will become paralysed and will end up being devoured; even if, with a stroke of luck, he manages to escape, he will remain dumb for the rest of his days.

Michel Pastoureau [2]

Learning to speak in Cambridge

Seventeen years ago I came to Cambridge for the fist time, invited by my old friend S. Hugh-Jones, to deliver a series of lectures on Amazonian anthropology that marked a personal, if not ontological, turn in my career. Those lectures, thanks undoubtedly to their distinguished setting and audience, had an impact that, however we assess its true significance, was utterly beyond my expectations. The wealth of reactions they provoked within and without our professional community ended up associating, not to say scaling down, my work to a few conceptual soundbites from which I felt unable to separate myself — instead, I have spent the greater part of the intervening years trying to draw all possible (and a few impossible) consequences of the research results condensed in those four lectures. I do not regret such single-mindedness, because it

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[1] Cited by Jêrome Neutres in 'Bill Viola, la métaphysique sans la philosophie' (http://www.philomag.com/lepoque/breves/bill-viola-la-metaphysique-sans-la-philosophie-9467)

[2] M. Pastoureau, *La vie quotidienne en France et en Angleterre au temps des chevaliers de la Table Ronde* (Paris: Hachette, 1976).

gave me, even more unexpectedly, a role as a political actor (minor, to be sure) in the current cultural renaissance of Latin America, a continent with an Amerindian (or Afro-Amerindian) face and a definite project to further a different version of the good life in this crucial moment of global metaphysical dejection. Be that as it may, the present occasion has a clear and dear emotional meaning to me. I would never have imagined that those distant lectures would turn out to be the ultimate cause of my being back here, today, to enjoy the exquisite privilege of paying homage to Marilyn Strathern.

As a rule, in eponymic Lectures the speaker is expected to start with some apt reference to the work of the honoured ancestor and then proceed as he or she pleases. I am not going to do this. Marilyn Strathern is not a distant figure but a very much alive and much esteemed colleague, one who has taught me more than many an anthropological ancestor. Her work has been a major influence on mine not only ever since we met for the first time in 1997, but, as I came to realise, before I had even started to read her. When I arrived in Cambridge I was already in the process of becoming a Strathernian unawares — call it the aesthetic trap of the intellectual gift if you will. In short, were I a Hagener, I would be owing Marilyn many more fat pigs than I could ever hope to assemble. May the puny one I present to you (to her) today serve at least as a token of my undischargeable debt.

Moving briefly from Cambridge to Oxford, if you excuse me, I have chosen a passage from Lewis Carroll as a perfect fanciful rendering of a Strathernian analysis of any piece of ethnographic material ('the sense of outlandishness that Strathern's sheer originality can produce' — Holbraad & Pedersen 2009: 372). Reading a text by her is like opening a chapter of a book titled *Marilyn Adventures in Otherland*. Allow me then to cite this little passage from *Though the Looking-Glass*, which describes what Marilyn, I mean Alice, experiences when she enters the mirror-world:

> Then she began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible. […] 'They don't keep this room so tidy as the other,' Alice thought to herself…

Let's call this passage 'learning to see in Anthropology'… This moment of traversing the mirror (in whatever direction, I hasten to add) is strongly evocative of the so-called 'ontological turn', to which my name, among those of a few other delinquents, has been associated.

So here we are: I have chosen to pay homage to Marilyn Strathern by talking about the current ontological debate, since, as I see it, her work is one of the main inspirations of this debate, even if the fearsome word 'ontology' seems to be quite foreign to her own mode of expression.

On ontological delegation

In a well-known collection titled *Thinking though things*, thanks to which the expression 'ontological turn' acquired its controversial conspicuousness in anthropology, the editors mention a 'quiet revolution' led by authors like Wagner, Latour, Gell, Strathern and yours truly.[3] Rarely has such a mild adjective as 'quiet' helped provoke the very opposite of what it means! But what was that revolution about? The editors of the collection describe it as 'a shifting of focus of questions of knowledge and epistemology to questions of ontology'. This way of characterising the move is referred to in the final paragraphs of my 'Amazonian Perspectivism' lectures of 1998.[4] I later came to realise that others far more competent than I had already defined the Modern *philosophical* revolution by precisely the opposite shift, i.e. from ontology (left to the hard sciences) to epistemology (the philosophers' and later the social scientists' province). I was not too far off the mark, then. In those paragraphs I observed the profound philosophical debt of our discipline to the Kantian epistemocritical turn, and called for a return of sorts to a 'pre'-Kantian, pre-modern even, speculative concern with ontological questions when it came to dealing with our ethnographic materials (I remind you that 'Speculative Realism' was yet to be born, at that remote epoch).

That call to arms was presented both as a proactive sublation of the 'crisis of representation' syndrome that problematised ethnography as an ultimately impossible task (the *Writing Culture* critique) and as a refusal to reduce anthropology to the ontologisation of human epistemology in the psycho-cognitivist style. It didn't deal so much, however (as did the post-modernist critique), with the problem of the representational *credentials* of the epistemic *subject* (its spurious claims to transparency, its monological elocution etc.), concentrating rather on the representational *status* of the *object* of ethnographic discourse, i.e. its 'nature' as consisting in representations (cultures, world-views, ideologies) which 'stood for'

3 Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007: 7ff.
4 Viveiros de Castro 2012.

something else (power differentials, relations of production, ecological constraints, cognitive universals). I countered such current conceptions of anthropology as the reductive interpretation-explanation of allegorical meanings with the proposal that we should move from the epistemological critique of ethnographic *authority* to the ontological determination of ethnographic *alterity*, the elucidation of the terms of the 'ontological self-determination of the other', in other words, to a redefinition of anthropology as the comparative (i.e. expansive) description of tautegorical meanings.

This story has been retold an untold number of times. Let me just add here that I trace the 'ontological turn' to three historical stimuli, not just one.

The first was the crisis of representation, which destabilised the subject/object divide, just as it complicated the other two dualisms which, like the first one, are versions of the Culture/Nature distinction, this quintessential convention of Western ethno-anthropology: that between persons and things (also, humans and non-humans), on the one hand, and that between language meanings and extra-linguistic reality (concepts and objects), on the other hand. We know how the *Gender of the gift,* intensifying and as it were 'reflexifying' the lesson of Mauss, shattered the person vs. thing presuppositional frame. By having Melanesian ontologies such as manifested in their 'knowledge practices' actively analyse, rather than being passively analysed by our own ontological determinations, the *GoG* offered us an entirely new take on some well-cherished tenets of our political economy (concerning production, gender, work, property, power, not to mention society and the individual). A note here: the notion of 'knowledge practice', so crucial to Strathernian anthropology, is a radically non-epistemological concept, notwithstanding its name. I deem it the very icon of what Gildas Salmon (we will come to him) called 'ontological delegation', the operation that dissolves the regrettable dualism between 'theory' and 'practice', first by subsuming theoretical knowledge under a generalised concept of practice, but at the same time making knowledge the very model case of practice. For let us not forget the role that the identification between social action and social analysis plays in *GoG*. This is not unrelated, I believe, to other 'outrageous' Strathernian subsumptive inversions, namely, the determination of production as a mode and a moment of exchange, and of exchange as a shift of 'subjective' perspectives rather than an 'objective' economic transaction.

As to the language/reality gap, let us just recall the visionary semiotics of Roy Wagner, in which what was an ontological chasm became a process of reciprocal co-

production, and, most importantly, in which concrete particulars (the 'really existing reality') were reconceptualised as 'symbols that stand for themselves', a move which anticipates some crucial aspects of Bruno Latour's recent *An Inquiry on the Modes of Existence* (Latour 2013). Wagner's semiotics may be also seen as anticipating the concept of the 'material concept' put forth by Holbraad and his collaborators in *Thinking through things*, through which concepts-as-representations were preempted by the 'duplex' circuit of concepts-as-things (endowed with material efficaciousness) and things-as-concepts (endowed with thinking capabilities).

The second stimulus was the rise of Science and Technology Studies. The ethnographic description of 'Science' (both of the actual practice of the sciences as of the political usages of the concept in the singular) had profound consequences for anthropology as a whole. And that for a simple but far-reaching reason: the Modern opposition between Science and non-science is both a 'model of' and a 'model for' the wider divide separating Western modernity from the others, the barbarians, the primitives. Such is the founding gesture of 'our' era: the identity of the 'Modern West' depends on this segmentary duplication of two outsides of itself. Because of this, any attempt to investigate *empirically* how Science establishes its *a priori* political discontinuity with politics (and with opinion, religion, ideology), immediately jeopardises the other great divide, that between We and They, moderns and non-moderns, and sometimes 'even' between humans and nonhumans. This is how epistemology insidiously becomes ontology. Note that the anthropology of science did not abolish (on the grounds of it being non-scientific, as it were) the distinction between science and non-science; rather it multiplied and differentiated such distinction in a cloud of practices with specific demands and obligations. The epistemological break of Bachelardian fame became, if not mendable, at least bridgeable; transitions multiplied, continuities were observed, compromises noticed, symmetries proclaimed. This new state of things made all frontiers, internal as well as external, much more permeable. Alterity became delocalised. The 'other' (within or without the West) ceased to be the simple carrier of a mistaken 'culture' that represented distortedly 'our' external nature, or, conversely, a wild, true representative of the internal nature of the human species, whose socio-psychobiological evolutionary makeup is always more easily accessible, as we know, through the examination of the ways of illiterate, ignorant people.

The ontological program had a reasonably clear idea of what changes it intended to bring in response to the above-mentioned stimuli, and has now a wealth of ethnographic as well as theoretical results to present as evidence that those two challenges have been met by anthropology. The third challenge, however, lies mainly ahead of us. It is utterly consequential, not to say ominous, from a political and metaphysical point of view, and problematises 'the very idea' of an anthropological discipline in a totally unprecedented way.

As you might have presumed, I am talking of the feeling that there is now one big, global, major problem that confronts 'all of us', nay, that conjures and at the same time utterly problematises this entity I am calling 'all of us'. I am referring of course to the ecological catastrophe and its dialectical connection to the economic crisis — the well-known problem of the end of the world versus the end of capitalism (which will come first?). There is now a virtually universal consensus among climatologists and other Earth system scientists that the industrial revolution, and the exponentially growing demand of energy by all nations ever since, have set in motion a process that will irreversibly change the planetary thermodynamic parameters that have been in place all along the Holocene. This has made painfully real the negative transcendence of the 'world' in regard to 'humanity' even as the latter ceased being a biological agent among others and became a major geophysical force (Chakrabarty 2009); physics started to give way to metaphysics when 'culture' and 'nature' traded their traditional places of respectively figure and ground. The spread of this conviction reinforced the dissatisfaction that was already building up around the turn of last century with much of the Modern constructivist metaphysics, starting with the Kantian ill-named 'Copernican' revolution and its anthropocentric as well as ecotoxic implications, and helped launch the properly philosophical version of the ontological turn, also called the speculative turn or speculative realism, of growing notoriety. I must leave the relation between the ontological turn and the ecological concern to another occasion; let me just say I am convinced that in the somber decades to come, the end of the world '*as we know it*' is a distinct possibility. And when this time comes (it has already come, in my opinion) we will have a lot to learn from people whose world has already ended a long time ago — think of the Amerindians, whose world ended five centuries ago, their population having dropped to something like 5% of the pre-Columbian one in 150 years, the Amerindians who, nonetheless, have managed to abide, and learned to live in a world which is no longer their world 'as they knew it'. We soon will be all Amerindians. Let's see what they can teach us in matters apocalyptic.

Gildas Salmon, in an outstanding paper presented at recent Cérisy colloquium, situates what he calls 'the ontological program' within 'the history of comparativism in anthropology' (this is not without significance).[5] Observing that it would be insufficient (though not wrong) to define the program as a simple case of the substitution of ontology for culture, he explains the ontological program as an articulated response to a crisis of anthropological knowledge, which but started with the already-mentioned post-modern critique. Salmon see the crisis as related to 'the economy of the person' within ethnographic discourse (he is referring to the famous Benveniste article on pronouns), and frames the response in terms of what he names 'ontological delegation'.

Salmon defines the notion of delegation in the following terms. When an analytical operation becomes too costly (politically and/or epistemically) to be realised in a sovereign, monopolistic fashion by the sociologist or anthropologist, he/she transfers it to the actors themselves. This causes a total *rebooting* of the investigative endeavour, forcing the analyst to confront the unexpectedly powerful speculative forces that spring from the actors, far more philosophically-minded (in a broad sense) than we normally take them to be. The notion of an *ontological* delegation means that the anthropologist is forced to take his/her own ontological assumptions out of the strongbox and risk their robustness and transportability by letting them be counter-analysed by indigenous knowledge practices, or, to put it differently, he/she defines whatever he/she is studying as a counter-metaphysics with its own requisites and postulates. Anthropology becomes comparative metaphysics even as metaphysics becomes comparative ethnography. And the anthropologist turns into an ontological negotiator or diplomat. To quote the position paper of the recent AAA symposium on the politics of the ontological turn, which I co-signed with Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen: 'The anthropology *of* ontology is anthropology *as* ontology; not the comparison *of* ontologies, but comparison *as* ontology.'[6] Here I think it would be fitting to cite Patrice Maniglier, the philosopher who, after having remarked that the expression 'comparative metaphysics' should be interpreted as tautological, proceeded to the exciting suggestion that anthropology is bound to occupy in the present century the same role as model science and epistemic paradigm that physics played during the Modern period. Anthropology would be thus in a position to furnish the new metaphysics of the 'Anthropocene', the epoch when humanity became a molecular

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[5] Salmon 2013.

[6] Viveiros de Castro, Holbraad & Pedersen 2014.

multiplicity and a physically molar agent — and this is one of the reasons I have less misgivings than some of my colleagues about the appropriateness of the term 'Anthropocene' to designate the new deep-historical epoch we have entered. As Maniglier wrote with respect to Latour's ongoing project of an anthropology of the Moderns — actually an inventory of the different 'modes of existence' recognised (as through a glass darkly, though) by the ontology of the Moderns:

> The difference between Latour and his predecessors [Maniglier is thinking of classic metaphysicians, either early modern or late post-modern] is not in his metaphysics' contents, but in the way that it's employed: diplomatically. It is used to negotiate encounters and confusions of ontologies in the plural. This metaphysics is thus thoroughly anthropological, if we do define anthropology as the science [*savoir*] that uses only the clashes experienced between our most deeply-rooted beliefs to produce not a body of knowledge [un savoir] about something, but a redescription of ourselves in the light of alterity. (Maniglier 2014a: 40)
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As in the famous Wagnerian one-liner: 'Every understanding of another culture is an experiment with one's own'. Or, as Maniglier himself put it in another occasion, 'anthropology is the formal ontology of ourselves as variants'.[7] This should at least begin to assuage the qualms about the necessary presupposition of a 'meta-ontological' level underlying the notion of ontological alterity.

One or several wolves?

The title of this part comes from chapter two of *A Thousand Plateaux* (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) — we will see the multiple appositeness of it soon. My problem here is the 'grammar' of the concept of ontology, as we would say in the old days of the linguistic turn. Morten Pedersen (2012) remarks on the 'incredulity and shock' with which many students and scholars have received the introduction of the term in contemporary anthropological discourse, given its 'metaphysical, essentialist, absolutist connotation' (I believe he is paraphrasing Webb Keane here, but the outraged sentiment is widespread).

Let us start by recalling that 'ontology' is not the only philosophically charged word in use by anthropology. Not to speak of the very name of the discipline, a compound of *two* metaphysical, essentialist etc. philosophical concepts, we have been happily playing along with words like 'politics' or 'myth' (a philosophical concept if

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[7] Maniglier 2009.

ever there was one) without much ado. Anthropology did not wait for 'ontology' to enter the stage to have its own metaphysics, 'the tacit', and here I quote Peter Skafish,

> metaphysics of anthropology, that poorly mixed, difficult-to-swallow cocktail of the phenomenological Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and a little Marx, according to which everything human is constituted, in essence, from some mix of *Zuhandenheit*, lived experience, perceptual/cognitive forms, historical conditions, and that favorite metaphysical master concept of anthropology: practice. Unless that metaphysics is smoked out and exposed for what it is, the new, explicitly metaphysical metaphysics of anthropology … will not be heard. (Skafish 2014)

Be that as it may, 'the proud word 'ontology'', as Kant once said, was not a newfangled recirculation of an archaic, ornate concept: suffice it to recall the wonderful paper by Irving Hallowell, 'Ojibwa ontology, behaviour, and world view', published 54 years ago.[8] Neither was it the exclusive brainchild of a certain 'Cambridge clique', as an anonymous objector dubbed the 'ontological turn' folks (the 'Cc' referred basically the contributors to *Thinking through things* and myself, with the evil hand of Marilyn Strathern somehow behind all that). The term ontology appeared more or less at the same time in many a STS context (think of Annemarie Mol, John Law, Bruno Latour, Andrew Pickering), in the prose of philosophers-historians of science (think of G.R. Lloyd, Ian Hacking, Peter Galison), even as it was independently adopted — relatively so, of course — by many anthropologists (think of Philippe Descola, Michael Scott, Ghassan Hage, Elizabeth Povinelli or Naoki Kasuga). Recall, also, that the whole psycho-cognitive sect of our discipline seems perfectly happy with the term, used, it goes without saying, in their own metaphysical, essentialist and absolutist way.

As a matter of course, 'ontology' can be found a bit everywhere these days, from political science journals to computer programming lingo. The meaning of the term in these different contexts and authors varies exceedingly, for sure, but beyond such diversity, the current popularity of the term bears witness to some sea changes that affect the whole *Zeitgeist*: the exhaustion of the critical *nomos* that separated the phenomenon from the thing in itself, and the breaking apart of the hierarchical division of labour between natural and cultural sciences, as well as between pure (theoretical) reason and practical (moral) reason. But perhaps above all, it expresses the growing feeling that our own Modern ontology (singular) such as laid down by the scientific revolution of the 17th century not only was made largely obsolete by the scientific

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[8] Hallowell 1960.

revolutions of the early 20th century, but that it also turned out to have disastrous consequences when considered from its business end, i.e. as an imperialist, colonialist, ethnocidal and ecocidal 'mode of production'. Ontology came to the fore precisely at the moment the ontological foundations of our civilisation — and the unquestioned cultural supremacy of the peoples who founded it — are seen as starting to crumble. This led, among other things, to a growing tendency (not without its fierce enemies, it might be said) to accept the plural inflection of the word and the thing, either 'internally' (the profession of a pluralistic ontology) or 'externally' (the idea of an ontological pluralism), and even to the 'post-plural' awareness of what I would call a performative condition of *ontological anarchy*, to borrow a concept from Peter Lamborn Wilson.

As we shall see, not all *political* anarchists accept *ontological* anarchy, i.e. the idea that the only viable political meaning of ontology in our times depends on accepting alterity and equivocation as 'unsubsumable' by any transcendent point of view (the very idea of a transcendent point of view is an oxymoron, which did not prevent it from being posited by some ontologies). The affirmation of alterity — being-as-other as intrinsic to being-as-being (Latour 2013) —, and equivocation — variation as truth (Maniglier 2009) — is not tantamount to the positing of *one* ontology, even if a pluralist one, or of *many* ontologies for that matter, but signifies rather that ontological questions are political questions insofar as they come into existence only in the context of friction and divergence between concepts, practices and experiences within or without culturally individuated collectives, *given,* I stress the polysemic value of this word, given the absolute absence of any exterior and superior arbiter. Ontological differences, to get to the point, are political because they imply a situation of war — not a war of *words*, as per the linguistic turn, but an ongoing war of *worlds*, hence the sudden, pressing insistence on the ontological import of our ethnographic descriptions, in a context in which the world ('as we know it') is imposed in myriad ways on other peoples' worlds (as they know them), even as this hegemonic world seems to be on the brink of a slow, painful and ugly ending. No arbiter, no God, no United Nations Protection Force, no police operation to bring delinquents into line. The war will be as often as not fought with guerrilla tactics, to be sure. Until the powers that be (I mean BP, Shell, Monsanto or Nestle) bring their atomics to the scene.

Is this a satisfactory answer to question of 'one or several wolves', i.e., ontologies, then? Maybe yes, maybe not. We're trying. It depends on how you use the

word. There is nothing wrong, in principle, in talking of as many ontologies as there are cultures (I know Martin Holbraad disagrees; I agree with him, partially), just as you say of a given physical theory that it has its own ontology.[9] Not because 'ontology is just another name for culture' (the famous GDAT Manchester question of 2007), however, but rather because 'culture' may always have been just another name for ontology — minus nature of course; a poor man's ontology if you will. (The only authentically ontological notion of culture I am aware of is that of Wagner in *The Invention of Culture*,[10] precisely because it comprises the variation of natures in parallel to that of cultures). I have always found a tad bizarre the Manchester question. Ontology, as I understand it, is both an anti-epistemological *and counter-cultural* (in both senses of 'counter-culture') philosophical war machine. If ontology were to be 'just another name for' anything, I would suggest it should have been *Nature,* a term the grammatical pluralization of which provoked the same uneasiness as that of 'ontology'. Hence my 'Amazonian multinaturalism', a sort of ethnographically grounded proof-of-concept of the argument according to which, if anthropologists were more than willing to accept a 'bloated universe' when it came to cultures (I am evoking here a Quinian argument that appeared in the pages of *Cambridge Anthropology*)[11], then in the name of what exactly would one forbid them to go for a 'bloated' — how about calling it non-anorexic, rather? — natural universe as well? A multiverse, to recall the celebrated concept of William James?

As Salmon observed in his already mentioned paper, in many works that further the 'ontological program', the metaphysics of representation is shown to be much more efficaciously shattered by means of the ethnographic description of a counter-metaphysics than by the internal demystification to which the post-modern criticism was adept. In the particular case of 'Amazonian perspectivism', an ethnographic concept which was consubstantial to a certain economy of the person where the position of the self was metaphysically encompassed by that of the other, the potential affine, the enemy, the problem of ethnographic *authority* was completely overtaken — or perhaps sublated, forgotten by incorporation — by the ethno-anthropology, or indigenous metaphysics, of *alterity*.

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[9] "Warning: the expression 'the ontology of a theory' is sometimes misleadingly employed to designate the reference class or universe of discourse of a theory. The expression is misleading because ontologies are theories, not classes." (Bunge 1999: 201).

[10] Wagner 1981.

[11] Heywood 2012.

But the question somehow lingers on. Can we do with 'ontology' what we did with culture, namely, have one Ontology singular, and many ontologies plural? What is the grammatical number of ontology, after all? Is it a count-noun, to begin with, or some sort of mass-noun? Does it accept an indefinite plural, or must it be inflected only in a dual form (as in anthropomorphic versus anthropocentric ontologies, as I sometimes feel inclined to think)? Does it accept a paucal, a greater paucal, a trial, perhaps a quadral number inflection (as in Descola's ontological quadripartite taxonomy)?[12] Not to mention the already mentioned post-plural, interdiscursive, fractally multiple, scale-independent, moving-target-like ontology deployed by Strathernian anthropology with which I am aligned, and which is a sort of metaphysico-methodological Tardis (*Partial Connections* is a little book that is 'much bigger inside')? Or is ontology better employed as an adjective (ontological) than as a substantive? Or yet again, do ontologies behave like rigid, impenetrable solids that are solipsistically 'withdrawn' within their own incommensurability, or, as Jensen and Morita (2012: 9) for example suggest, speaking of the Japanese take on the ontological turn, they show a wealth of 'complex interplays through which different ontologies are often busily interfering with each other […] ontologies are never hermetically sealed but always part of multiple engagements'. I find impossible to disagree with this statement, but would just add that sometimes it may be pragmatically, i.e. politically vital to describe ontologies as intractable sets of presuppositions that are aggressively contradictory with other similar sets, and/or as crossing one another in the pre-space of chaos without any mutual interference whatsoever.

As Holbraad has remarked, in the same vein, in 'ontological turn' the word 'turn' ends up being more important than 'ontological' — for a turn has many more senses than that of a change of direction, a shift towards a better, brighter paradigm, an anthropological city upon a hill as it were. It may mean the act (I'm quoting from the cheap dictionary on my computer) of 'moving something in a circular direction around an axis or point', as in the turn of a screw. And in an important sense, what we have been advocating was essentially an ontological turn of the epistemological screw — a methodological tightening up of our ethnographic descriptions, which, rather than allowing us to 'discover new things' about the other, marked the limits — ontological, not critical — of what can be known (and then said) about that other. It also meant 'turn' as in 'an opportunity or obligation to do something that comes successively to each of a number of people' —, and in this sense the ontological turn is 'the turn of the

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[12] Descola 2013.

native', the act of making room for the other (*faire la place aux autres* — Stengers), the obligation of letting the natives, whoever they are, have it, ontologically speaking, their own way. Lastly, the notion of a 'turn' means, and here I paraphrase Holbraad again, the act of deformation-translation-variation of certain conceptual certainties of the analyst so as to make sense, I mean, make *real* (which does not mean make actual) the certainties or, for that matter, the perplexities of the other. As Patrice Maniglier also wrote, 'it is the fact of variation that makes us think, never the naked fact [*le fait nu,* the naked truth, one might say] of whatever is the case'.[13]

The good enough description

Marilyn Strathen once defined as anthropology's problem as that of 'how to create an awareness of different social worlds when all at one's disposal is terms which belong to one's own.'[14] I read this as equivalent to my problem of how the create the conditions of the ontological self-determination of the other when all we have at our disposal are our own ontological presuppositions. I draw from this constitutive paradox a fundamental principle of what could be called the discipline epistemological ethics: *'always leave a way out for the people you are describing'.*

My inspiration here came from *Difference and Repetition,* where Deleuze describes the concept of the 'Other' (*Autrui*). I repeat here what I wrote in 'The Relative Native' (Viveiros de Castro 2013). What Deleuze names *Autrui* is the less a concrete, already actualised other as against a self than the structure that makes exist a self and an other. This structure is that of possibility: *Autrui* is the *possibility, the threat* or *promise* of another world contained in the 'face/gaze of the other', i.e. in its perspective. In the course of social interaction with a concrete other, that world must always be actualised by a Self: the implication of the possible which is the Other is explicated by me. This means that the possible goes through a process of verification that entropically dissipates its structure. When I develop the world expressed by an Other, it is so as to validate it as real and enter into it, or to falsify it as unreal (and then — if I am an anthropologist — explain why this is so). Deleuze indicated the limiting condition that allowed him to determine the concept of the Other: concentrate on, freeze-frame your description at the moment in which the expressed still has no existence (for us) beyond that which expresses it – *the Other as the expression of a*

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[13] Maniglier 2014b.

[14] Strathern 1987: 257.

possible world. Anthropology can make good use of this advice: maintaining an Other's values implicit does not mean celebrating some numinous mystery that they might hide, but rather amounts to refusing to actualise the possibilities expressed by indigenous thought — choosing to sustain them as possible *indefinitely*, neither dismissing them as the fantasies of others, nor by fantasising ourselves that they may gain their reality for us. (They will not. Not 'as-such', at least; only as-other. The self-determination of the other is the other-determination of the self.) The Deleuzian moment in which the world of the Other does not exist beyond its expression transforms itself into an abiding condition, that is, a condition *internal* to the anthropological relation, which renders this possibility *virtual*. Anthropology's role, then, is not that of *explaining the world of the other*, but rather of *multiplying our world*, 'filling it with all of those things expressed that do not exist beyond their expression' (Deleuze). Do not explain too much, do not try to actualise the possibilities immanent to others' thought, but endeavour to sustain them as possible indefinitely.[15] Let me return here to the 'one or several wolves' title of that last section. In a crucial passage of the homonymous chapter of *A Thousand Plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari evoke the childhood dream of the Wolf-Man of Freudian fame, remarking how, although the dreamer mentioned a pack of wolves appearing to him, Freud could only see one wolf — the Wolf in general, the wolf as static concept not as a dynamic becoming:

> The wolves never had a chance to get away and save their pack [becoming as multiplicity – EVC]: it was already decided from the very beginning that animals could serve only to represent coitus between parents, or, conversely, be represented by coitus between parents. Freud obviously knows nothing about the fascination exerted by wolves and the meaning of their silent call, the call to become-wolf. Wolves watch, intently watch, the dreaming child; it is so much more reassuring to tell oneself that the dream produced a reversal and that it is really the child who sees dogs or parents in the act of making love. Freud only knows the Oedipalized wolf or dog, the castrated-castrating daddy-wolf, the dog in the kennel, the analyst's bow-wow. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 49-50).

We have been there as anthropologists, I am afraid. When a shaman shows you a magic arrow extracted from a sick man, a medium gets possessed by a god, a sorcerer laboriously constructs a voodoo doll, we only see one thing: Society (belief, power, fetishism). In other words, we only see *ourselves*. As Davi Kopenawa, the

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[15] This is what 'permanent' means in another of my bombastic proclamations, namely the definition of anthropology as 'the permanent decolonisation of thought' (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 4).

Yanomami shaman, scathingly observed : 'You Whites sleep a lot, but you dream only of yourselves'.[16] (Analysing that remark, a *tour de force* of reverse anthropology, would take us too far). I propose to illustrate that difficulty of our ethno-anthropology with an example from contemporary literature. There is no need to go back to the days when Evans-Pritchard found it necessary to warn his readers that 'Witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist' (and then took as his responsibility that of explaining why the Azande found necessary to conceive things that cannot exist *as we conceive them as existing*). Consider the following passage of an anthropologist I greatly admire, for many reasons, among which the sundry affinities I feel with both his writings (many of them, at least) and his concrete politico-existential engagements. I am referring to David Graeber. In a paper of 2005 titled 'Fetishism as social creativity: or, fetishes are gods in the process of construction', Graeber observes, concerning the power of certain Merina idols:

> *Of course* it would also be *going too* far to say that the fetishistic view is *simply true*: Lunkanka cannot *really* tie anyone's intestines into knots; Ravololona cannot *really* prevent hail from falling on anyone's crops. As I have remarked elsewhere[17], ultimately we are probably *just* dealing here with the paradox of power, *power being something which exists only if other people think it does*; a paradox that I have also argued lies also at the core of magic, which always seems to be surrounded by an aura of fraud, showmanship, and chicanery. But one could argue it is not just the paradox of power. It is also the paradox of creativity. (Graeber 2005: 430. Emphases mine.)

'It was already decided from the very beginning', as Deleuze and Guattari might have said, that fetishes could serve only to represent necessary illusions conjured up by living in society. Marcio Goldman, in an article from which I stole this passage as well as the general spirit of the commentary, observes that Graeber's effort to save the Marxian notion of 'fetishism', namely, that fetishes are 'objects which seem to take on human qualities which are, ultimately, really derived from the actors themselves', is somewhat misplaced. Graeber does try somehow to reconcile the Merina to Marx, arguing that fetishes only become 'dangerous' when 'fetishism gives way to theology, the absolute assurance that the gods are real' (real as commodities, one might say). The problem, says Goldman (2009: 114ff), is that this brave effort to save the natives' face is undertaken behind the latter's back, so to speak. One wonders, firstly, if the conversion of fetishism into 'a will to believe' that is at the root of (real, social) power would be accepted by the natives. And secondly, if such a reduction, which sounds more like an

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[16] Kopenawa & Albert 2010: 412.

[17] [He refers the reader here to his *Toward an anthropological theory of value: the false coin of our own dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).]

essay at reconciling one explicit Western ontology (to wit, dialectical materialism) with the Merina's implicit one, rather than an effort to problematise our own assumptions, does not end up, more than simply leaving untouched, reinforcing our own ontological framework. Magical power, as the Merina conceive it, cannot exist…

The so-called ontological turn is nothing more than a change in the disciplinary language-game that forbids, by declaring it an 'illegal move', such an analytical facility from the anthropologist's part. I have a feeling that much of the uneasiness or outright rejection of the ontological turn rhetorics comes from that restriction of the freedom allowed to the analyst: the freedom to stay put, to not move, to indulge in the heliocentric trick of making the observed turn (ontologically) around the observer. Such restriction is what I meant by the maxim 'always leave a way out for the people you are describing'. This is not a mere anti-holistic position, nor a modest refusal of ethnographic omniscience. It is about what I would call 'the good enough description', a phrase that was actually inspired by the brilliant connection made by Graeber in the passage above between the paradox of power and the paradox of creativity. The expression 'paradox of creativity' reminded me of the work of Donald Winnicott and his crucial concept of the 'transitional space', that area in-between pure subjective-internal and pure objective-external experiences of the infant, from which, says Winnicot, all art, all creativity and all culture spring. This area contains a paradox, is built on a paradox says Winnicott — a sort of Möbius-band situation where one can't tell the inside from the outside, because there is no such distinction — but *a paradox that we should refuse to explain*. This paradox, in a sense, is what makes us human, if I understand Winnicott correctly — though there is no reason to insist upon its human-only specificity (remember the Batesonian 'this is play' problem). Be that as it may, Winnicott is also the author of the wonderful concept of the 'good enough mother', the mother that is not always there, is not practically perfect in every way, leaves something incomplete as far as the desire of the infant is concerned, and therefore ends up by raising — unawares, as it were — a normal child. A more-than-good-enough mother would raise a less-than-normal-enough child. I like to think of a good ethnographic description as a 'good enough description'. Don't reduce the paradoxes. That hateful expression, 'breaking a butterfly on a wheel', which a colleague was patronizing enough to evoke in order to hedge somewhat his harsh criticism of my

work,[18] should be applied to what we do with, or rather, to the existential and intellectual work of the peoples we study. Anthropologists are butterfly collectors after all, *pace* Leach. We are always dealing with, we are only dealing with butterflies. Delicacy (and elegance) is required; too much historicizing will crush the butterfly.

And just so I do not finish this lecture without making a reference to another of my bombastic admonishments, let me say a few words about the idea of 'taking seriously' the things the people we study tell us.[19] Our colleague Rane Willerslev (2013) has recently published a paper titled 'Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps Not Too Seriously?' in which he takes issue with the idea, by observing that among the Yukaghir, ridiculing the (animal etc.) spirits is integral to their game of hunting; the Yukaghir know that spirits are an illusion, but they ironically go along with it. We should not take indigenous animism (for example) too seriously, he concludes.

I will disregard the irony of having a dour Dane admonishing a happy-go-lucky Brazilian not to take too seriously whatever there is to be taken. I will just repeat — I thought I had already explained myself about this in 'The Relative Native' — that to take seriously does not mean to believe (Willerslev seems to believe that Yukaghirs do *not* believe in their spirits), to be in awe of what people tell you, to take them literally when they do not mean to (not an easy distinction to make at all — if it is ever possible to use this Greek weapon of rhetoric deconstruction in other ethnographic contexts)[20], to take it as a profound dogma of sacred lore or anything of the sort. It means to learn *to be able to speak well* to the people you study, to employ a central concept and concern of Bruno Latour — to speak *about* them *to* them in ways they do not find offensive or ridiculous. They do not need to agree with you *completely* — they will never do anyway; all we require is that they find our description a good enough one. It will always be a caricature of themselves, with certain traits exaggerated, others downplayed, certain points overstretched, others minimised, and so on. Ethnographers are not photographers — they are portrait artists. Every portrait is more or less a caricature, with no pejorative sense implied. As we know, oftentimes a proper, deliberate caricature captures the 'spirit' (the invisible likeness, as it were) of the person represented much more eloquently than a photograph. And finally, those peoples we

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[18] 'To fault Viveiros de Castro's elegant, thought-provoking model of perspectivism for its strangely dehistoricized picture of the Amazon may be a "procedure too suggestive of breaking a butterfly on the wheel" (to borrow from Alfred Kroeber's complaint about those who dismissed Freud's psychoanalytic theory without acknowledging its originality and "fruitful suggestions")' — Starn 2011: 193.

[19] Viveiros de Castro 2014: 21-27.

[20] See G.R. Lloyd 1990: 19-20 on the metaphoric/literal distinction, *contra* Sperber

call animists (for example) may choose to take whatever they posit, their animal spirits, say, seriously or otherwise — and I am sure context is an exceedingly important consideration here (think of spirit-induced disease, for instance). But anyway, first they have had to go to the trouble to invent (or discover) those spirits — one wonders if it was just to have something to make fun of! Before learning not to take them too seriously, we should learn not to take ourselves too seriously, because, when the chips are down, anthropology is always in the situation of playing croquet with flamingoes, to end this talk with another Alice quotation:

> The chief difficulty Alice found at first was in managing her flamingo: she succeeded in getting its body tucked away, comfortably enough, under her arm, with its legs hanging down, but generally, just as she had got its neck nicely straightened out, and was going to give the hedgehog a blow with its head, it would twist itself round and look up in her face, with such a puzzled expression that she could not help bursting out laughing: and when she had got its head down, and was going to begin again, it was very provoking to find that the hedgehog had unrolled itself, and was in the act of crawling away: besides all this, there was generally a ridge or furrow in the way wherever she wanted to send the hedgehog to, and, as the doubled-up soldiers were always getting up and walking off to other parts of the ground, Alice soon came to the conclusion that it was a very difficult game indeed. (*Alice in Wonderland*, ch. 8).

The problem is, unfortunately, that one often has one's head hacked off in the game. But that's what we were here for in the first place, as anthropology is always about sticking one's neck out through the looking-glass of ontological difference.

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